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Critical Analysis Paper

The key to saving humanity is abandoning society. This is the message that is delivered in Daniel Quinn’s trilogy of stories *Ishmael, My Ishmael* and *The Story of B.* The idea that it is our cultural story, or “mythology” that is dooming humanity, not so much the individual human inhabitant, is commonly displayed through these three stories.

Daniel Quinn was born in Omaha, Nebraska in 1935. In 1957 he received his bachelors degree in English, after which he served as a biography and Fine Arts editor at the American Peoples Encyclopedia, managing editor of the Greater Cleveland Mathematics Program, head of the mathematics department at Encyclopedia Britannica Educational Corporation, Executive Editor of Fuller & Dees Publishing and Editorial Director of the Society for Visual Education. He instituted the Stateville Penitentiary Writers' Workshop and served on the Board of Listeners of the World Uranium Hearing, Salzburg, Austria, convened in 1992 to hear testimony of victims of uranium mining, nuclear waste disposal, and nuclear power disasters around the world.

Quinn realized he was in a world in chaos, but for some reason, he felt he was the only one who knew. He had to find a way to make others aware of the impending chaos that surrounded them and in his search he found literature. Quinn’s first book, Ishmael, explores the issues with the world we live in and how subconsciously it effects us.

The main destabilizing factor in humanity is the way that we believe ourselves to be. This is to say that as presented by Daniel Quinn, it is our cultural story, or mythology that is inherently dooming our society, not our own personal flaws. There are many aspects of our society that are taught to us from birth, whether or not we are always aware of it. Quinn refers to these subconscious lessons as the teachings of Mother Culture, or simply: what a culture makes you believe and know without ever directly teaching it to you. Many of these subconscious lessons are what directly corrupt humanity as a species.

Along the lines of evolution of humanity man has begun to believe that he owns the world, man has severed himself from his fellow man, man’s mind has become stuck in and close-minded due to Mother Culture, **in a nut-shell**, man is doomed because man is programmed.

"The premise of the Taker story is the world belongs to man...The premise of the Leaver story is man belongs to the world." page 239

For the continuum of this paper is will be vital to understand that leavers define any branch of humanity which remained “third-world” hunter-gatherers and either reject or ignore the ideas of “civilization” and that takers define any branch of humanity as we commonly know it to be, civilized, educated, overwhelmed by technology.

Ishmael spends the length of the story revealing all of the hidden, dirty secrets about mankind and – after rearranging the narrators perspective of the world – sends him back out into society to try to change it for the better. Of course this takes the course of the entire book.

My Ishmael is a side-quel that takes place at the same time and place as *Ishmael.*  However, in *My Ishmael* the reader discovers that while Ishmael was teaching the narrator from the first book he was simultaneously teaching a second pupil, a young girl named Julie. The lessons taught to Julie, while they are all the same lessons as those taught to the narrator of the first *Ishmael* they are approached in a much more elementary level – in order to allow young Julie to pick up on them more easily. While this certainly does not make the book “dumbed down” it does allow certain more difficult ideas of the previous publication to be driven home a little harder. Several key ideas presented from *My Ishmael* are that humanity is help captive under what Ishmael calls “a distorted civilization system”, man is not the pinnacle of all evolution, and a very unique idea, agricultural surpluses allow mankind to believe themselves to be able to “thwart the gods”.

A sequel to the stories *Ishmael* and *My Ishmael, The Story of B* no longer has the friendly gorilla, Ishmael, as the prophetic teacher of the truth. Instead this role is taken up by the mysterious monk, known only as B. Jared Osbourne replaces our young Julie as a failed father of the church. While in seminary, Jared was viewed as a prodigy, there were incredibly high hopes for his future in the church. Unfortunately, Father Osbourne was a horrible disappointment to the church. After finishing seminary he accomplished and did very little – that is until he was called upon to examine B. The church believed B to be the antichrist, it was Father Osbournes assigned task to find B and verify this assumption. If the assumption turned out to be true, it would be Father Osbournes duty to kill said antichrist.

Not long after Osbourne becomes involved in B’s inner circle does he become enthralled by his teachings, he realizes that he can not do the task which is set upon him and he casts aside his obligations to the church and, eventually, becomes B’s predecessor.

While the plot for *Story of B* is far more in depth than that of either *Ishmael* or *My Ishmael*, the teachings of B are very similar, if not simply repetitive. It can be assumed that B was formerly one of Ishmael’s several pupils. Several unique ideas to *Story of B* are that B proposes that humans are the first creatures to lock up food for themselves – this being one of many ways B says one can identify a human. B also teaches that man believes that man needs saving from humanity, the idea of Totalitarian Agriculture. Totalitarian Agriculture is the idea that the way humanity behaves as a species is almost completely mirrored in how it grows its food. This is to say that when the Takers want a certain crop they find a section of land, destroy everything that’s already there and replace it with only the one crop they desire. This idea mirrors how the Takers have “conquered” the world.

The leading reason, and most important idea to understand, in the explanation of man’s uncontrolled self-destruction is that of Mother Culture – a coin termed by Daniel Quinn. “Mother Culture includes everything in your existence that perpetuates a mentality of domination and dominion." Simply, Mother Culture is everything subliminally taught to you by your native culture. Not in the terms of algebra and social studies, but more of what is taught beneath one’s conscious. The teachings of Mother Culture are subliminal, most people won’t even realize they know said teachings until they are pointed out. Such teachings are ingrained in one’s day of life and very hard to undo. It is the leading reason that man’s society is responsible for man’s destruction, over man himself.

Basically, man is programmed throughout their life to believe things about themselves and about their world. These things are seldom taught or said and are stored in the subconscious of the people in our societies. It drives them, whether they know it or not, Quinn refers to this force as mother culture, and she is the leading reason we are doomed. She is the underlying reason behind all others listed here now.

The first problem dooming man is that man believes that he owns the world and that it is his to do with as he wishes. While this idea is wholly false it is also one that is not self acquired but taught. This is an idea taught to man from birth by Mother Culture, or in other terms, the teachings of man’s society. “The world was not made for any one species… Then man was certainly not made to conquer and rule it.” (Ishmael 145) Due to the ignorance that man rules the world, mankind has decided that the world is theirs and that it is to be conquered. This mindset is destroying the planet, however, the impact of this is never truly felt the Takers because if it is, in fact, their world why would they feel regret from destroying it? Surely it should be up to them… If we did not universally believe this there would be more sympathy towards the world’s destruction and more action would be taken against it. “‘…no one specifically wants to destroy the world.” "And yet you do destroy it, each of you. Each of you contributes daily to the destruction of the world.’" (Ishmael 25) There is no Taker on their green Earth who willing wants to end, damage or contaminate the planet for no other reason then sinfulness. This is because humanity cannot help but be so destructive. They have been programmed to think they can do as they like, similar to how a child would drop their clothes on the floor of their room. It’s their bedroom and they can do with it as they desire. They mean no harm to the room by discarding their rubbish throughout it, it is simply something they do.

The Taker’s conviction that they own the world is a double edged sword, however unfortunately this causes even more destructive problems for mankind. Since Takers believes they own the world, they have convinced themselves that they were given such power because they were meant to bring about paradise to the earth. Naturally this is unreachable and leads all takers to believe that they are in fact flawed, since they cannot feasibly achieve this goal.

Men (Takers) have separated themselves from their fellow man (Leavers). This is yet another leading reason, entirely the fault of society not the individual, that man is unfortunately doomed. As it was stated earlier, there are two branches of humanity in Quinn’s stories: The Leavers and the Takers. What we consider to be civilized are the Takers and what we consider to be uncivilized would be the Leavers – those who chose to stay behind. The Leavers live in harmony with the world, they cause no long-term damage to it and leave little behind after they’re gone. They are in balance with the Earth. “In order to become fully human, man had to pull himself out of the slime. And all this is the result.” (My Ishmael 62) Our separation from these groups of people is what distinguishes us as the Takers. The Takers live in contrast and conflict with the world. They cause extensive long-term damage and leave behind prolusion, contamination, and industrialization. While we believe ourselves to be superior it is actually our destructive nature that makes us inferior to our fellow man. Our separation from the leavers is what begins the downhill cycle.

"Trial and error isn't a bad way to learn how to build an aircraft, but it can be a disastrous way to learn how to build a civilization.” (Story of B 110) The Leaver societies are and have been here longer than any Taker society. They are groups of people who have lived successfully more millions of years dating back to the first hunter gatherers. We, the takers have spent the past two thousand years going through thousands of different systems to keep ourselves afloat and historically they have all successfully failed with enough time. It is only logical to assume the same will occur with our civilization. It will be the fault of our society that we fall, not of the individuals in it. It is a difficult theory to comprehend, but a very logical one.

The life of a civilized human is entirely defined by their single society. It is who they are, what they do, what they, eat and how they live. Without the society and social structure they are nothing. This has caused us to become locked into a social structure that is difficult to change. It is heavily destructive, and though many Takers acknowledge it’s destructive tendencies, they aren’t willing to sacrifice their way of life to fix these issues. "You're captives of a civilizational system that more or less compels you to go on destroying the world in order to live." (p.25) Even the fact that Takers feel the world is theirs, the realization that it’s in need of help isn’t enough to fix it. Not because there are not people willing enough, financed enough, or dedicated enough, but because in order for the way of life they hold so dear to continue thriving these destructive attributes must thrive as well.

In addition, mankind is doomed to believe that they are, in fact stuck the way that they are. Takers do not believe that they can be fixed. They believed they are born broken and bad and that this is why they are so inherently destructive. Mankind’s ability to justify their mistakes or make them the fault of something else removes the blame of the planet’s destruction from them. Their belief that they are flawed and unfixable is what leads the Takers on their inevitable quest for a “Savior who will come down and make all things right. This idea spearheads all major and minor religions of the Taker society. We cannot help ourselves, therefore there must be a higher power that will help us, we must simply await his arrival and he will make all right again.

As this essay has made to be perfectly clear, the human society is doomed because of the subconscious beliefs of the society as a whole. It is not the individual man but what the individual man is taught to believe. This is to say that as presented by Daniel Quinn, it is our cultural story or “mythology” that is inherently dooming our society, not our own personal flaws. It is all of our responsibilities to learn the lessons shown here, cast away the smothering, but light, societal veil that surrounds us and work to change our world for the better.

The Key to saving humanity: to abandon society.

Still have about seven quotes to add in, along with some smoothing out (i.e. flow and transitions.)